

eggs

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eggs

by [boycoffin](#)

Summary

The grounds of the manor were vast, strewn ankle-deep with the detritus of a seemingly perpetual autumn. Will felt fear, but it was at arm's length from him, fear of the unknown rather than the familiar. And yet he could feel the comforting shadow of Hannibal in this place, even long faded; the shade of lichen clinging to the exposed roots of a tree, perhaps, the curve of a headstone, the shushing of leaves underfoot, were all reminiscent. A melancholy tug in his gut, nostalgia for a place Will had never been. He had seen echoes of this place in a smile, a coordination of color; Hannibal's every choice was either to defy, or embrace. Never to deny from whence he had come. Never to bury the memory.

But peel back the unassuming flesh, carve away the uncut quartz of the afternoon, and there dwelt a sickness here, old and patient. A plague lying in wait to devour.

In which Will Graham eats something, and becomes something, that he probably shouldn't.

Notes

this work skips along the length of the series, and in places relies heavily upon canonical dialogue, new elements injected into existing scenes, and the au interpretation of characters' gestures and microexpressions, so that the reader might see these interactions in a new light. some exchanges that differ from the series as we saw it are a mix of my own additions, and redacted lines from the original scripts. no infringement is intended, etc.

kiaušinis

Chapter Summary

When he picked up one of his own knives—flimsy and poorly balanced, he realized now—he felt unsafe and destructive, mangling anything he cut, torturing something already dead. He was killing time until the world felt right again. Until he could sit at that table, in the jewel darkness, and be served.

Even when the conversation was tense, even when the food was well outside his comfort zone, Will always luxuriated in how he felt when dining with Hannibal. Those evenings brought him the perfect balance of satiety, physical fullness, and flavors; the sensations unfolding in slow, measured chapters. Acts in a great drama, rather than mere courses. And when it had been too long since he dined with Hannibal, Will *knew* it, felt it keenly, a pang not of craving but something like homesickness. Meals he ate at home, or on drives to and from work and crime scenes, were palliative in nature, and painfully inferior. His stainless steel cutlery at home felt clumsy in his hands; even his one nice plate felt cheap (it had been from a prior set, years ago, from when he lived in Louisiana, and even then it had been second-hand, incomplete). When he picked up one of his own knives—flimsy and poorly balanced, he realized now—he felt unsafe and destructive, mangling anything he cut, torturing something already dead. He was killing time until the world felt right again. Until he could sit at that table, in the jewel darkness, and be served.

The first thing Hannibal had prepared for him was scrambled eggs. There were other elements to the dish, namely sausage, but the eggs stood out to Will. He remembered being baffled that something so simple, something Will himself had been cooking several times a week since he was a child, had been elevated so far beyond the ordinary. If Hannibal could make scrambled eggs, one of the most foolproof meals ever devised, into something fit for a king, then he could do anything. And Will swore to himself in that half-lit motel room that no matter what Hannibal laid out for him, from then on, he would try it. Like an adult. (*We could socialize like adults.*)

Will, for his part, bought eggs from a farmer whose land he passed on his way to the highway and to civilization. Packed into old paper cartons from the grocery store, tabs worn soft and dull from repeated use, the farmer called them *stepchildren* or *uglies*: offerings too small for the smallest size grade, or misshapen, weirdly elongated, yellowish in color or blueish like a vein, afflicted with nodules which were perfectly harmless but nevertheless unnerved the tube-lit supermarket set. Will had seen the sort of eggs Hannibal favored, richly freckled brown ones that looked like they always ought to be warm to the touch. And then there were the quail eggs, tiny and perfect, shells lively with constellations of static. Will didn't even know where you went about buying quail eggs, unless you had a friend who happened upon some in the woods in their free time.

Will could tell that he was probably Hannibal's only friend who happened upon *anything* in the woods in his free time. Though usually he was happening upon corpses, and his time had an exhaustingly high price.



A game Will played: *guess what's for dinner*.

He never guessed right.

'A dish I created, myself,' said Hannibal as he constructed the main course before his guest, drizzling a spiral of dark, beautiful sauce onto Will's plate with a strange-looking utensil, 'the name of which I have not yet decided.'

A sort of orb, translucent and firm and the size of two fists, was placed at the center of the plate before Will, and topped with a sprinkle of herbs and grated fig.

'I... have no idea what to call it, either,' said Will, figuring honesty was best. The thing on his plate had something suspended inside it, but he couldn't tell what. 'Is this... hmm. I know there's a method where you can make caviar out of wine or something.'

'Spherification. And no, I prefer not to introduce alginates into the preparatory stages of cooking, despite the striking results.'

'You prefer substance over beauty, Dr Lecter? I find that hard to believe.'

Hannibal dashed a touch of black salt over the spiral arms of the sauce on Will's plate.

'Substantiality itself is beautiful, Will. To be safe, to be warm. Fullness. Enjoyment. These are all realities that one may experience, if subjectively. We do not feel the pleasure of others, save through the lens of the self.'

Will watched as Hannibal went to his own place at the table.

'I'm enjoying the mystery,' he said, admiring the play of light on the strange orb on his plate. It seemed stable, not that he was going to poke it to check. For all he knew, it would melt. 'Though I would like to know what I'm getting myself into.'

'By crossing my threshold, you entered into a pact with me, Will.' Hannibal began to arrange his own portion off the elaborately-garnished tray he'd carried in. 'I promise to nourish and protect you while you willingly submit to such treatment; you promise to, I'm sorry to say, flatter my ego as your host.'

Will smirked briefly. 'I'm not so good at the flattery part.'

'You have not run screaming from my offerings, yet.' Hannibal's eyes were bright with mischief. 'Come the day, our pact will no longer stand. But nothing short of that can keep me from my duty to provide you an enlightening experience. Perhaps someday,' he said, voice soft and fond, 'you will be *my* host, and I might enjoy similar treatment.'

Will peered at the orb again. 'Is this some sort of gelatin?'

Hannibal looked amused as he finished off his own plating with the black salt. ‘Do you intend for me to indulge your idle contrariness this evening, not caring whether it limits your growth, or shall I tell you to eat your dinner like a good boy, lest there be no dessert?’

Will huffed a laugh, blushing. ‘All right, keep your secret.’

A flicker of a smile. ‘If you insist.’

‘What’s the sauce, then, if I may ask?’

Hannibal sat down, and picked up his glass of wine. ‘*Beurre noir* infused with pomegranate and a touch of dark rum.’

He took a drink, then set his glass aside once more, picking up an asymmetrical spoon. Will accepted this tacit instruction and took up his own, watching how Hannibal moved, mimicking him precisely.

The texture of the orb did seem very much like gelatin, and when the side of Will’s spoon broke through to the suspended center, dusky-pink liquid, thick and inviting, flowed into the negative space of the spiral of sauce, working its way around the plate until the shallow bowl of it was filled. The color paired with the dark sauce perfectly, and as Will watched, the slightly thinner consistency of the sauce began to bleed in fractals through its lighter companion, eager veins darting across to touch the black grains of salt. They started to look a bit like neurons.

An idea took hold.

‘Is this an *egg*?’ Will had never heard of pink yolk before, nor any egg the white of which would remain translucent enough for light to pass through even upon cooking. But if Hannibal had taught him anything, it was that he knew very little.

Hannibal only smiled, enjoying his first bite. When he had swallowed, he said, ‘And may it fill you well.’

The texture was strange, but Will found that he liked it, liked the harmony of flavors, and soon the strangeness had passed entirely. He felt like he was meant to have this—of *course* he was, it had been prepared for him, but Will had an odd prickling feeling like *déjà vu*, like when he knew what had happened at a crime scene before even going through the steps. Something fated, portentous.

Which was foolish. It was only food.



He awoke, curls clinging to his forehead, but not from a nightmare. He *ached*. He tried to sit up, but something made him *squirm*, made him arch, and he stayed down. Furtive despite his solitude, Will rucked up his t-shirt slowly, in stages, fingers sliding over sweat-damp skin. He did not move to touch where he might on some other occasion, hands stroking his stomach instead.

He was sure he had imagined it, but even if he had, Will felt too good just now to care. Waking up feeling anything like pleasant, well, *that* was a novelty. He should enjoy it while he could.

Warmth and weight, as if he'd only just left Hannibal's table of three nights prior, as if the intervening hours and dull realities of commute and work and death had not dispelled the feeling. Warmth and weight, and *security*, and a thrill of arousal, its inviting tendril unwinding coil after coil within him.

Will pressed the flat of his palm against his abdomen and his breath hitched at the feeling. Warmth and weight, cock pooling with blood and sensation against his thigh, trapped to him by his stubbornness to wear clothes to bed. Something unyielding there, just *there* where the heel of his palm kneaded, something smooth and *solid* in there, and Will didn't know where that thought arose, but it did, and so did *he*, thick with his pulse and trapped, untouched, ignored in favor of what Hannibal had given him.

(What in hell was he thinking? Will didn't care, let the breathless notion carry him, arching against nothing, full of a dream.)

Will continued to press low on his belly, rocking his wrist from side to side, getting a feel for the shape of the thing, the dome of it inside him, if he were any thinner you'd be able to *see* it in there. Unannounced, the image of a magic eight-ball came to mind, and Will almost laughed. It was the same size, after all. What would it be saying, shaken as he bucked and longed for touch?

It is certain.

Yes.

Yes.

Will rolled his hips, making little sounds of effort in the back of his throat, stifled pleas behind bitten lips. He used both hands, now, cupping against the shape inside his belly, marveling at what must be his own imagination, it *must* be. And with the pressure of both hands he felt it slide slightly within him, and his nerves sang as it seemed to—somehow—cant back against his prostate and rest its weight there.

His eyes flickered back, lower lip sliding free of his teeth as he gasped and came.

Will hadn't even touched his cock.

As he lay there, panting, trembling, curling over onto his side, he remembered.

We do not feel the pleasure of others, save through the lens of the self.

By crossing my threshold, you entered into a pact with me.

Perhaps someday you will be my host.

May it fill you well.

‘Oh, *god*,’ Will whispered, hips twitching even now, voice cracking the oath into pieces.

Miles away, Hannibal hummed softly to himself in contentment, having felt the first wave of Will’s acceptance of his gift. In time, with care and nourishment, it would grow larger. In time, with Hannibal’s characteristic attentiveness, it would suffuse Will’s body, giving Hannibal a direct link to Will’s pleasure centers. But for the moment Will was just out of reach, perhaps just a little frightened, and drifting back to sleep on a quiet stream of endorphins. And for now, that was enough.

They had an appointment set for tomorrow evening, and dinner to follow.

Hannibal would coax him, and instruct him, and feed him, as he always did.

The time would come, someday soon, when Will would not be capable of turning away.

eyerlekh

Chapter Summary

Will deserved pleasure, from little workaday enjoyments to the rich, plush, dizzying depths of hedonism into which Hannibal had begun to initiate him. Will was a novice yet, but as the gift inside him grew, so would his understanding. He had accepted the gift, after all, without fear, without question; if he had not wanted it, it would not have taken root.

In time, Will would begin to feel it growing.

The egg reconstituted itself once eaten. Once broken down to its individual nutrients, disparate elements found one another to merge and become whole again, settling heavy and warm in a safe place.

Hannibal had never gone through with an offering until now, had never desired to. Until now, when an egg would become ready, he would place it in a climate-controlled little cabinet, keeping it cool but not so cold as a refrigerator, until he craved to be one with it again. In three months, another egg would grow to replace what had gone on before—the perpetual optimism of biological imperative. In the meantime they were delicious, and there was something *electric* in the taboo of consuming oneself.

Will was the first to partake of Hannibal's gift, and would be the *only*, as was the way of things, as Hannibal's maker had done before him.

His maker. Out from the belly of the dark woods he had come, damp and soil-scattered, seeking an heir. Hannibal had been young, desperate for purpose in the wake of losing all, but he had not been *foolish*. His maker guided him as one interrupts a rivulet of water with one's hand—the final path was inevitable, but the illusion of control was without price. His maker nurtured him, and nourished him. Hannibal heeded every order, and accepted what was done, and in time he held all that he had learned like a knife. His maker nourished him, then, too.

Now, grown to richness and a keenness of senses, Hannibal had waited, watched, tested Will's suitability, and had not found him wanting; he had brought Will into his trust, and done all things needful to ensure his gift would be accepted.

In time, Will would begin to feel it *moving*.

The gift would acclimate to its new environment, and filaments would begin to break past the membrane of the central spore. Their long white fingers delicate as mist, Will would hardly feel them as they crept curiously along inside. Will would hardly feel them, but when they had taken root in and control of his nervous system, he would certainly feel it, *then*.

Hannibal deeply felt the fact that Will only seemed to let himself know pain, and no more. Anything more substantial than a fleeting instant of pleasure was shoved away, away, in favor of regret, and an intensity of compassion fatigue the like of which Hannibal had not seen since his time as a surgeon.

Will deserved pleasure, from little workaday enjoyments to the rich, plush, dizzying depths of hedonism into which Hannibal had begun to initiate him. Will was a novice yet, but as the gift inside him grew, so would his understanding. He had accepted the gift, after all, without fear, without question; if he had not wanted it, it would not have taken root.

In time, Will would know contentment with his own soul, the abiding peace that Hannibal himself had felt ever since his maker's gift had made him what he was. The connection to the earth, and to the heavens, and all things, all minds. And while Hannibal would not return to the black dirt from which his maker had sprung, would not allow those acres of ghosts to echo their entreaties in his mind, Hannibal had found a new and fertile plot in Will Graham. The storm would come, the ground drunk on rain; and Will, now sworn to him utterly, would answer Hannibal's call.

nargesi

Chapter Summary

Their words started to blur, obscured by the roar of pulse and breath. Will felt cold, then too warm in a cascade that made the hair on the backs of his arms prickle.

Something low in his belly squirmed, and Will jolted a little. Someone walking over his grave.

It was happening again.

Will had felt like hell for many months, but he only started to *look* it, to really look like Death had given him the once-over and politely declined, when he started losing time. The hallucinations increased, fevers spiked without warning, he started getting comments at work.

‘You look positively consumptive!’ said Jimmy, like a compliment.

‘’M fine,’ said Will, like always.

‘Seriously?’ Beverly gave him a skeptical glance. ‘You look like something you’d find under a hollow log. Do you *ever* sleep?’

‘In fits and starts,’ said Will. ‘Mostly fits, if I’m being honest.’

‘Maybe start taking a Benadryl before bed.’ The catch engaged as she pulled out one of the drawers of the mortuary cabinet, the heavy metallic *clonk* bouncing around in Will’s bones, making him shiver. ‘Those little pink fellas knock me out better than Johnny Walker and new age music.’

Will took off his glasses, scrubbed a hand down his face. ‘I don’t like feeling drugged.’

‘Hey, speaking of drugs, you know who I was thinking about the other day?’ said Zeller. ‘Mushroom guy.’

‘Oh yeah!’ said Jimmy, as if he’d remembered an old favorite song. ‘Mushroom guy. Stanford...?’

‘Stammets,’ said Beverly.

‘Right,’ said Jimmy. ‘Y’know, I wonder sometimes if he had the right idea.’

‘Don’t,’ said Will, but the warning was heavily dampened by exhaustion.

‘Not the murdering part! The fungus part. After all,’ Jimmy went on, ‘considering how humans would be completely *useless* without all the bacteria that keep us going... all I’m saying is that when aliens make contact, they’re more likely to want to talk to fungi than us. The largest organism on the planet is of the genus *Armillaria*. We thought they were separate entities because we anthropomorphize a mushroom’s cap as being it’s *head*, and there are millions of them.’

Zeller considered this. ‘He’s got a point. I mean, we’re not even third-string players when it comes to survival ability, not to mention sheer numbers. We’re needlessly complicated microbe apartments, made of meat.’ He smirked. ‘Now, *there’s* a line for the online dating profile.’

Their words started to blur, obscured by the roar of pulse and breath. Will felt cold, then too warm in a cascade that made the hair on the backs of his arms prickle.

Something low in his belly squirmed, and Will jolted a little. Someone walking over his grave.

It was happening again.

Reaching like eerie phalanges to clutch and drag him down, antlers breached the walls and pressed slowly in all around him. But after a point they branched too much, were too slender, too white to be what they appeared, and Will realized that each fractal hair vibrated with the jarring thud of his heart. A symphony of trembling, and he the unwitting director.

Their spores reach for you when you pass by, said Stammets, sprawled and bleeding, Will’s memory embellished with black soil at the margins, microscopic filaments, beads of crystalline dew like tears, or blood. *I know who you’re reaching for.*

The world snapped back into place, too loud, oppressively bright.

‘—ll? You all right in there?’

‘What? Sorry.’ He let out a shaky breath. ‘Could you repeat that last thing?’



Hannibal could feel Will’s relief as the moment passed.

Though it had appeared troubling on the surface, in the grand scheme of things Stammets had been a blessing. There was no risk of anyone comparing him to Hannibal, or vice versa, and his unstable talk of hybridizing humans and fungi rang true to no one.



‘There’s something... wrong. With me.’ Will looked down into his glass of wine, watched the flames reflected in it. ‘I seem to go a half-step into somewhere else, like looking through another person’s glasses with one eye. Conversations noise through a slurred and foreign hum, translated underwater. Things come forth and touch me, and for the life of me I can’t determine what they are. Like...’ Will shook his head, swallowed, ‘veins of a carcass drained

of blood, empty and white. Hollow.’ He sounded a little contemptuous, perhaps of himself, and raised his glass to his lips but did not yet drink. ‘*Fragile*, or something like it.’

‘All of us are subject to the whims of the mind,’ said Hannibal.

‘I did some digging,’ said Will, tone lightening from black to grey. ‘I’d wondered about that weird egg dish that you served me some time ago, the one you invented.’

‘Ah, and what did you discover?’

Will huffed a laugh. ‘Very little, I’m afraid. I suppose your secret is safe.’

‘For now,’ said Hannibal, with a warm smile.

coquille brisée

Chapter Summary

Will would wake from the rasp of terror inside his skull and see, in the dim light of his cell, wine-dark beads of blood clinging to every inch of him. When guards would stalk the corridor to check the beds, when orderlies would rattle through with their trays of food that tasted of nothing but salt, and later with the toothbrush and paste and little cup that Will could use only under supervision lest he carve the handle away into a weapon, Will felt something unfurl like a white veil in the air between them, unseen to any eye but his own.

Will lay with his eyes closed, but unasleep, on his bed, in his cell, at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

With the careful application of immunotherapy and patience, the fire in his brain had slowly but surely faded to embers, what might have been Will's funeral pyre now only evident by the memory of warmth and the faint scent of smoke. There was only so much he could expect to recover, the doctors said; discomfort may linger, relapses occur. There was only so much Will could expect to recover from the wrecked hull of his former life. But as he healed, he knew what had been real, and what had been the death throes of his consciousness. So much of his life had become apprehension, in that he lay in wait for his dreams to apprehend him. Perverse arabesques projected by the lanterna magica of his illness, the flickering half-reality of Plato's cave. But as these illusions faded, as his vision sharpened and his visions cleared, Will found the few remaining truths that glinted through the mire—when the obscuring filth had been panned away, a foundation remained. Something he could build upon. Where once had been the revulsion of the abattoir, extispicy; what had been immolation, pyromancy.

The visions did not leave him, not entire. And Hannibal's voice did not leave him, not whole.

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Still more often, amid the harrowing monotony of incarceration Will felt a strange peace. The shape in him had grown about an inch since it had taken hold, but no further, not in a way that might be evinced by external touch alone. But in the back of his mind Will knew that it had been reaching ever deeper into him, knew by the way his nerves did not feel like his own, the way thoughts would startle like dropped porcelain, the way sensations would rise

unbidden and émigré, as if Will were somewhere else, holding things with someone else's hands.



‘Are you familiar with *The Wreck of the Hesperus*?’

Hannibal, seated outside the cage at the precise distance of their matching leather chairs, as comfortable as if they were still in his office, inclined his head in confirmation. ‘Longfellow. Yes, I’m familiar.’

‘Blue were her eyes as the fairy-flax,’ Will quoted wryly, ‘her cheeks like the dawn of day.’

The barest hint of a smile crossed Hannibal’s face, a movement of the muscles around his eyes, and nothing more. ‘Do you feel you have taken your little daughter to bear you company on an ill-fated vessel, Will?’

‘I think we both bound her to the mast,’ said Will.

‘Perhaps you were merely the one who discovered her after the storm that took her life.’

They looked at each other, unwavering. The pull Will felt within him was something like yearning, a cousin to nausea.

‘The girl’s father reassured her that he could weather the strongest gale,’ Hannibal continued. ‘So, I believe, might you.’

Will’s mouth twisted in derision at the suggestion. ‘He couldn’t be trusted. That wasn’t his promise to make.’

‘She trusted him, nevertheless.’

Will swallowed, turned away. ‘He was dead.’

‘Death and rebirth are identical,’ said Hannibal, rising to his feet, buttoning his jacket with a smooth twist of his fingers. ‘All things that grow are nourished by decay.’

‘Is that your way of saying I’ll rot in here?’

‘Tell me,’ said Hannibal, ignoring the question, ‘do you enjoy it, down there in the damp and the dark?’

Will’s shoulders tensed. Sarcasm was the only shield he could reach, because he didn’t want to give Hannibal the satisfaction of knowing the truth. And he had the unsettling suspicion that any satisfaction Will felt, any comfort, Hannibal felt also. ‘Who wouldn’t?’ he said.

‘A lesser man than I know you to be,’ said Hannibal, turning to go.

‘I *know* what you fed me,’ Will called after him, unable to stop himself. ‘All of it. I see it, now.’

Hannibal did not turn back, and his only answer was the tap of his heels against the floor.

baltyminė medžiaga

Chapter Summary

‘What have you brought me this evening?’

Will placed a faded grey egg carton on the countertop, its print worn away with time. A partial letter here, a smudge of color there. Hieroglyphs of a former life. ‘Stepchildren.’

Hannibal’s expression quirked in surprise and amusement. ‘You have my attention.’

In the dream, a new creature tore free of the dying animal, gasping for life as it climbed out of its living grave, sloughing off the afterbirth of death.



Night, crisp and eerie. Gentle fibrils spun in dreamlike slowness up through the earth as Will ran across the snow. They followed him out of the dark wood, trembling with each footfall and the beat of his heart.

As he took hold of Randall Tier’s antlered head and turned until life ceased, eager fingers insinuated through the broken window, slithered around the frame and across the scree of glass, neuralgiform and grasping for connection in the dark. Scores upon scores bowing over the beast’s broken carcass, lost in a fervor of necrolatry, and Will felt the great spore in his own abdomen judder in sympathetic delight, sending shocks of arousal through Will’s body, wringing his lungs of breath.



‘Are you enjoying this?’ said Hannibal as he took Will’s coat. ‘Our new arrangement.’

Will got halfway to a smile. ‘You can’t always be the one who puts food on the table.’

‘It’s true that I favor pure mutualism over other forms of partnership,’ said Hannibal as they made their way to the kitchen. ‘What have you brought me this evening?’

Will placed a faded grey egg carton on the countertop, its print worn away with time. A partial letter here, a smudge of color there. Hieroglyphs of a former life. ‘Stepchildren.’

Hannibal’s expression quirked in surprise and amusement. ‘You have my attention.’

Will opened the carton to show him. Knobbly shells, greenish or ridged or almost black, stood in their ranks awaiting orders. ‘There’s a little farm in Wolf Trap,’ he said, ‘just this old man and his wife and son. Few cows, a few goats. Not industrialized—I cringe from the idea

of thousands of animals crammed into a room. The chickens out there just wander around in the trees, sometimes you don't see them for a couple days.' Will shrugged. 'A few years back I went out to retrieve one of my dogs who'd decided to court their schnauzer. We got to talking, I got a price list for stuff they won't peddle at the farmer's market due to customers'... aesthetic tastes. It's peaceful, out there.'

'A simpler life, though by no means an easier one.'

'They say not to refrigerate the eggs, or wash them. Apparently that's how they do it in Europe.'

Hannibal inclined his head. 'Quite so.'

'To be honest I can only afford something that's free-range and organic on a technicality. The ugly ones are cheap.'

'On the contrary, they're very attractive,' said Hannibal.

Will smiled a little self-consciously. 'And yet nobody wants 'em but me. Wonder why that is.'

'Mutation is the only constant across all forms of life, save for that life's inevitable climax. Shall we make simple fare of your simple farm's contribution? A quiche,' said Hannibal, already retrieving ingredients. 'Thyme and enoki mushroom sautéed in truffle oil shall fit the bill nicely, I think.'

Their physical proximity was intoxicating; the thrumming drone of need Will endured at all hours of the day had reached a muted roar as soon as Hannibal had greeted him, as if seeing Hannibal, breathing the same air, had flipped a switch only he could reach.

Will leaned back against the opposite counter, out of the way, disguising his trembling. 'Why do we fear things that diverge from our expectations?'

'In the case of your stepchildren, I believe it comes down to a rudimentary understanding of the world and our tenuous safety in it, which we develop in infancy.' Hannibal took out a little dish and began to strip thyme leaves off their stems into it. 'Before one can intellectually process the concept of variety, a firm grasp of normalcy has already taken hold. A child knows that an apple may be red, and the fundamental shape of it, from an alphabet book. As he grows in knowledge of the world, he will learn that some apples are green, or yellow, or mottled. With adulthood comes the knowledge of cultivars, the subtle differentiation of texture and piquancy, but we always return to the source, and the wellspring of our preferences is always fear. We reject the unusual because we suspect it is an imposter.'

'Pokeberries always did look delicious to me,' Will admitted. 'And horse nettle could pass for tomato. They're pretty little things. Too bad they're toxic.'

'Precisely.' Hannibal offered Will a few stems of thyme, and Will joined him, sliding fingers against the grain to shed the leaves. 'At our core, we believe beautiful things to be good for us. We shy from the misshapen fruit, the pitted flesh, the press of a bruise under our thumb,

because in our minds that is not what an apple ought to be. Evolutionarily that has served us, but has also led us on a number of foolish paths. Bitter greens, for instance, may sustain us, rather than poison. But the average person will always pick the shiniest apple, the most beautiful and whole, just as we believe, somewhere in our primal hearts, that an egg is not an egg if it deviates from the shape and color we understand from our internal alphabet book of reality.'

'E was always for elephant, in my experience,' said Will with a smile. 'So first impressions matter that much?'

Hannibal placed a cluster of slender, long-stemmed mushrooms on the chopping block, cut and set aside the dirt-clung root structure, and began to behead each stalk with a pluck of gentle fingers. 'It is rare to find oneself repelled by an experience, only to embrace it later.'

'Unless the source of that repulsion was a lack of understanding,' said Will. 'You taught me that.' He paused at his task, the tips of his fingers ridged with a faint ghost of soil from the herbs, and gestured at the mushrooms Hannibal held. 'Can you really eat them, in good conscience?' said Will in a hushed voice. 'Being what they are?'

'You should know by now, Will, that conscience, good or bad, has no place at my table.'

It was true, it was the only truth, and Will followed him into the dark wood, trembling with each footfall and the beat of his heart.

trynys

Chapter Summary

They might betray him, turn their hearts against the affection that had once warmed between them; they might recoil from the knowledge of what they had eaten at his table, but they would never know what else they had consumed.

‘If I’m ever apprehended,’ said Hannibal, ‘my memory palace will serve as more than a mnemonic system, I will live there.’

Will looked to him, again, from the cheery fire devouring the minutiae of lives. ‘Could you be happy there?’

‘All the palace chambers are not lovely, light and high,’ said Hannibal, his tone unreadable despite his smile. ‘In the vaults of our hearts and brains, danger waits. There are holes in the floor of the mind.’

Will turned to select more material for burning. ‘And the crawl-space underneath is dark, and damp.’

Hannibal stepped toward him further, and Will felt the overwhelm of his power, of their union. ‘Whatever transpires up here,’ Hannibal murmured, ‘our kind live on regardless, in the belly of the house.’

‘Waiting to reemerge in season,’ said Will.

Hannibal gently dropped a sheaf of papers into the flames, watching them settle. ‘Yes.’



I dream darkness comes into me. It comes and it’s insidious.

Up my nose, into my ears, damp fingers prying at me. Finding every way inside.

I feel poisoned.



Hannibal could feel the end approaching, with the inevitability of nightfall.

They might betray him, turn their hearts against the affection that had once warmed between them; they might recoil from the knowledge of what they had eaten at his table, but they would never know what else they had consumed.

They might betray him, but they could never hide from him, now. Unseen, Hannibal's ambient spores hung thick and fertile in the air, so that anyone who crossed his threshold, anyone who shared time with him or touched him, became an extension of him, a trembling branch of his organism's neural web. Hannibal felt the specter of their sensations and their moods, knew when they felt cold or hungry or aroused, but it was nothing like the connection he had with Will. Dear Will, heir to his power, who had taken his gift without question! Will, who was even now at a critical stage of his development, learning to manipulate his own connection not only to tertiary others affected by his own ambient spores, but to manipulate Hannibal himself.

Hannibal could feel the end approaching, the collapse that prefaces rebirth. He knew when they would come for him, and how. And if they wanted blood, they would have it. Theirs, as well as his.

One of the quickest ways to link someone to him—to peer into their naked mind whenever curiosity tempted, not merely when they felt a strong emotion or intense sensory experience—was through an open wound.

After all, Abigail had taken to it so well. She could not be his heir; Hannibal could only make one, and Will had been perfect, everything he could have dreamed. She could not be Hannibal's heir, but she could be Will's. Soon all this would be behind them.

The storm had come, the ground drunk on blood. The wreckage would be washed clean, so that they might begin anew. Night was falling.



Out of the blackness and the hiss of rain, out of the grave dug by deceit, a creature rose.

Will swam in and out of reality.

‘We couldn’t leave without you.’

He couldn’t breathe, the pain of the gash hardly important in the wake of the bone-deep drag and *snap* of filaments being severed as Hannibal ripped free the central spore.

Blood roared in Will’s ears as it was torn from his body, the egg that had become as much a part of him as his heart, his voice, his emotions—

‘A rare gift I’ve given you.’

—all gouged out and flung aside like refuse, now, dropped heedlessly to the bloodied floor, where the pieces twitched and began to dissolve, tendrils dropping motionless all at once, sudden, final, in death—

‘But you didn’t want it.’

kuro-tamago

Chapter Summary

‘I accept what Hannibal has done,’ said Chiyoh. ‘I understand why he’s done it.’ She paused, looked down at the steam rising from her cup of tea. ‘It is foolish to go into the woods at night. Hannibal went, when he wished to die. Do you wish to die?’

Chapter Notes

[you'll be needing this](#)

The chapel smelled of wax and incense, stone and metal, body and blood.

And Hannibal.

The latter wasn’t so much a smell as it was a feeling, a tingling static across Will’s skin. It coated his throat, his nose; it blurred his eyes, a trick of the light, false fog.

Just as it had when he’d gone, once healed, back to the house in Baltimore. He had returned to remember, and to see what could be salvaged of the wreck. The clear, clean note of Abigail’s presence singing across his nerves as if she was still there. In a way, she *was* still there; Hannibal had made her a part of him, of both of them. And Will, his senses sharpened by his turning, could feel the aftershocks of her life like ripples in the stillness of the dead house.

Drawn by the presence of his maker, Will went down into the catacombs. He didn’t much care whether he came out again.

There in the dark, surrounded by the press of soil rich with death and centuries of decay, Will felt a peace that had eluded him for many months. He felt he could sleep, here, free of dreaming. Safe in the embrace of the earth. Waiting, to reemerge in season, or not at all.

The humming pull of Hannibal’s presence was stronger here. Even robbed of his central spore (all pleasure dulled to meaninglessness without Hannibal’s control, but all *pain*, also), Will was too far gone to Hannibal’s kind for it to make much difference. He could sense his maker as clearly as if they were touching. Though Will knew not the word for what had been done, he knew that Hannibal had taken possession of him, or a part of him, and that part lived on even when the physical symbol of Hannibal’s gift was rescinded. Once the spores took you, they *kept* you.

The few weak filaments left in Will had done what they could to mend him, working in secret behind sutures and bandages as Will lay in the climate-controlled cabinet that was his hospital room. And in time, his *own* grew and made light work of it. He felt the delicate tendrils move within him as before, reaching into every part of him to twine round his nerves and shield them, but without Hannibal's gift, Will was weak, his growth stunted, and the arousal he felt was flat, metallic, unpalatable. Hardly better than the blunt jab of pain.

Abigail would go with him, even after all he had done. Hands held over her eyes by her love of him, blocking out the light, she saw no other choice.

Will didn't need to hide his face any longer. He saw the danger before him, and let his eyes fall closed in peaceful trust as he pressed forward. He would walk into the fire, tumble down into the abyss. It would be all right. Everything would be all right.



The grounds of the manor were vast, strewn ankle-deep with the detritus of a seemingly perpetual autumn. Will felt fear, but it was at arm's length from him, fear of the unknown rather than the familiar. And yet he could feel the comforting shadow of Hannibal in this place, even long faded; the shade of lichen clinging to the exposed roots of a tree, perhaps, the curve of a headstone, the shushing of leaves underfoot, were all reminiscent. A melancholy tug in his gut, nostalgia for a place Will had never been. He had seen echoes of this place in a smile, a coordination of color; Hannibal's every choice was either to defy, or embrace. Never to deny from whence he had come. Never to bury the memory.

But peel back the unassuming flesh, carve away the uncut quartz of the afternoon, and there dwelt a sickness here, old and patient. A plague lying in wait to devour.

Will picked his way through the sparse woods, loosely-scattered trees that had crept across the grounds for the past hundred years. The house and what had once been grand lawns seemed to exist in a divot in history, something dropped in the haste to escape, left undisturbed where it fell and rolled to a stop. And bordering this depression in reality was a great, dark forest, thick and closely-set, its canopy twisted together in pain, or protectiveness, so that only the barest tincture of light passed through to the forest floor.

Will approached the boundary where signs of human habitation stopped and primeval forest began, feeling a stronger pull of Hannibal's past, there, almost as if he could hear his voice. The filaments that branched through Will's every nerve began to tremble, as if to make him recoil and turn away. Around him, something stirred, a hissing in the deadfall. Disgust rose like bile in Will's throat.

Appearing, now, at the base of towering trees, in intimate clusters, in rings across the ground, were the fleshy and translucent caps of mushrooms, rising as if Will had tugged them forth on the end of a leash. The air was choked with spores that could be seen, malignant black dust rising from the litter of leaves and rot. Fine fingers rose from the soil, but haltingly, weak and infirm, dripping something like blood. An old time-lapse night terror juddering to life.

The hiss had assembled itself into whispers, but Will did not understand.

Ateik pas mane, liūdna vaikui.

Ateik pas mane, mano alkanas sūnų.

Eik siuo keliu. Aš maitinsiu jus. Jie paliko jums visiems vienas.

Will wrapped his coat tighter around him, his insides writhing with terror. The voice in the wood rose louder, with a tone of rebuke.

Aš esu vaiduoklis, bet jūsų kūnas gali atgaivinti mane. Paimkite mano atmintį, kurioje jis prigijo, kad galėčiau jį nužudyti!

The shaky tendrils seemed to only be able to grow a few inches from the ground, and were feebly pawing at Will's ankles, slick with gore. Will stepped back, shaking free of their frail hold as the whispers became pleading, desperate.

Mano sūnus buvo gražus, ir melagis.

Will turned and fled, the hiss following close behind him, wormlike growths slithering through the dead leaves, bloody caps of mushrooms forcing their way up from the ground so fast he could hear them growing.

Jis išmoko viską nuo manęs. Aš gali būti jūsų mokytojas!

Even muted by the low clouds, the comparatively dazzling light of the clearing caught Will like a punch, knocking the breath out of him. Wincing, he stood doubled over, grateful for the dry grasses and dead ivy underfoot. Anything but what had just surrounded him.

The air was rent with the report of a gun, and Will darted back beyond the treeline, footfalls snagged and hesitant in the crackling weeds.



The forest felt safer in the dark, and the voice no longer troubled him. He could feel its network of feelers shifting in the blackness beyond his vision, but he had their number now.

Parallel to that ancient darkness was the estate, birthplaces of old evil and new, facing each other in perpetuity, unable to turn away.

Will saw an uneasy light, and followed it.

Rising like an island of peace amid the storm of this place lay a garden, alight with fireflies. Will walked among them, marveling; he'd never seen so many in one place, not even on the bayous of Louisiana. And interspersed among them, after-images commingled with the light—neither black, nor white, nor the pink of a flare against the back of the eye, but stygian blue. A forbidden color one only sees when one looks away. Will held out a hand, and felt something brush against his fingers, there, the tingling he felt when Hannibal was near, the pull within.

Spores.



Warmth and weight, the scent of a hearth, tea.

‘Our minds can concoct all sorts of scenarios when we don’t want to believe something.’ Will thought back on the incident in the forest. His throat clicked as he swallowed. ‘We construct fairy tales. And we accept them.’

‘I accept what Hannibal has done,’ said Chiyoh. ‘I understand why he’s done it.’ She paused, looked down at the steam rising from her cup of tea. ‘It is foolish to go into the woods at night. Hannibal went, when he wished to die. Do you wish to die?’

‘I’m already dead,’ said Will. He let that matter rest for the moment, uncertain of the truth, himself. ‘Mischa doesn’t explain Hannibal. She doesn’t quantify what he does.’

‘He does what was done to her.’

‘How do you know it was your prisoner who killed Mischa?’

Chiyoh took her time to answer. ‘Hannibal told me he did.’ She looked away, wrestling with shame, or enlightenment. ‘Hannibal took someone from you, are you here to take someone from him?’

‘I wanted to find the wellspring,’ said Will, and Chiyoh seemed to know what he meant.



The train carriage rocked like a boat on the sea.

‘There are places on these grounds he cannot safely go. Bad memories.’

A drop of blood, or rain, struck Will on the cheekbone.

‘Is your prisoner the one who made Hannibal what he is?’

‘No. The one who led Hannibal to himself, that creature was older than any one man.’

Will frowned. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘You went into the wood, and came out again. You breathed in the black air, and yet you live.’ Chiyoh’s voice was soft, bitter. Steeped too long. ‘Any who have done this, they understand.’

Time blurred.

‘He’d be proud of you. His nakama.’ Chiyoh wouldn’t look directly at Will. ‘Shinkin no ōji.’

Time compressed.

‘We swore promises on objects, pledges at the altar and a blood oath, pricking our fingers.’

‘The poke of a needle, a tiny cut.’ Will took a swig of wine. ‘That’s how he got in.’

He opened his eyes.

A vision of Chiyoh hung suspended from a tangle of antlers, coiled with questing fibrils, red and bloodless white. As Will watched, each seeking finger of the organism found its welcome, squirmed between her parted lips, slipped smoothly beneath the folded lids of her eyes. Will reached for her, but not by movement of joint and muscle and bone: slick black filaments unfurled from his skin, painlessly, as if Will's flesh were as permeable as water. Reaching up and up, joining the others in their dance, the holy feast to devour the fallen dead.

rafanata

Chapter Summary

‘You defied my expectations, Will.’

He could feel the desperate writhing of fibrils beneath his skin, frantic to mend the severed nerves, staunch the blood. Will blinked, tried to focus his eyes. He swallowed with difficulty before he spoke. ‘Does that mean you’re afraid of me?’

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jack sized Will up with a glance, as he always had. ‘Would you slip away with him?’

‘Part of me will always want to,’ said Will.

‘You have to cut that part out.’

Will swallowed, looked away, hand twitching unconsciously just a fraction closer to the scar on his abdomen, beneath the flimsy shield of clothes and time. ‘Maybe he did that for me.’



In the cool, soft light of the Uffizi Gallery, they had become nearly whole again, if only for a moment.

‘Strange, to see you in front of me,’ said Will. ‘Been staring at after-images of you in places you haven’t been in years.’

They walked out into the glorious morning.

‘You and I have begun to blur.’

Hannibal smiled. ‘Isn’t that how you found me?’

The light slanted across the stones of the courtyard, golden beams suspended in space.

‘Even as the possibility of free will dissipates, my experience of it remains the same.’

The air around Hannibal and Will teemed with motes, an aura alive with their ambient spores, their union.

Will resisted the hunger, the urge to press against his maker and not let go. He could sense in Hannibal the presence of an egg forming, twin to what had been taken from him. ‘I continue

to feel and act as though I have it.'

They walked in perfect step with one another.

'We're conjoined. Curious if either of us can survive separation.'

Will slipped the knife down into his hand.



The world sloshed, Will trapped motionless within it, held together by surface tension and a membranous pain. Something vulnerable, suspended in albumen.

'You defied my expectations, Will.'

He could feel the desperate writhing of fibrils beneath his skin, frantic to mend the severed nerves, staunch the blood. Will blinked, tried to focus his eyes. He swallowed with difficulty before he spoke. 'Does that mean you're afraid of me?'

'The wellspring of preference is always fear,' said Hannibal, with that familiar leaning of his stance, the gentle smile. Seconds crept quietly by, respectful of the dying. 'I fear what I am without you, Will.'

Will's breath caught in his chest as a fresh jolt of pain lanced through the wound in his shoulder. 'So do I.' It took Will what felt like hours to enunciate clearly. 'I went... into the woods,' he said.

'And what did you discover there?' said Hannibal, a hand now resting over the scar he had given Will, or at least over the most visible one. 'What did you hope to learn?'

'Breathed the black air,' said Will, struggling to cling to his reason. 'Understood.'

'By the nature of your forgiveness, clearly you understood nothing,' said Hannibal, disappointed, turning his eyes away.

The tiniest sting of a needle pierced Will's skin.

'What you're experiencing is the first flush of fear,' said Hannibal, as Will felt himself sinking into the thick froth of disorientation, but thicker still was the glare of pain, so fierce and raw and *vibrant* now that he could see Hannibal once more, could touch him. It was a delight to feel *anything* so strongly again. 'Intense fear will come in waves. The body can't stand it for long.'

Will grabbed Hannibal's wrist with his one still-working hand.

'The one in the forest,' said Will, his mouth starting to rebel against speech. 'Your maker. He took Mischa from you. Took... all of them. So you would be his.'

'Hush,' said Hannibal, not unkindly. A little sad.

‘*Shinkin no ōji*,’ Will murmured, ‘I don’t know what it means.’ And the black weight of sleep settled over him.



As Will lay reluctant in the chemical embrace of rest, Hannibal prepared all things needful to save him.

With enough fear for one’s life, with enough pain, he might trigger a survival burst in Will, kicking his development into higher gear. Hannibal had seen the fine black threads within the wound, going about their strange and necessary work. Will had, unknowing, grown his own central spore, small and pearl-like where the egg had once been, but present nevertheless. The egg had left a dent in the bed of Will’s body, and now Will’s own power had come forth to take its place.

None but a true heir could have accomplished this. None but a soul meant to take the change could survive so long, and Hannibal felt such pride and love rise up to softly choke him when he thought about it too hard. But Will was still weakened, his progression slowed by what Hannibal had done to him out of that *same* pride and love that twisted his heartstrings now, and it was Hannibal’s responsibility to make things right.

He knew Will would not see things through that lens. Will had been turned out of adoration, elevated from the mire of his life into something finer, purer; Hannibal’s own maker had wrested him from the world and into the darkness, out of greed, and spite, and malice. It had been a just act, a noble act, when Hannibal carved into the flesh of the beast and tore free the locus of its power, stood in the dark and ate it, awash with his maker’s blood. Revenge and respect entwined. And while the organism was vast, its far-flung limbs unknowing that the center could not hold, all that remained to haunt the woods were the last neural impulses of that ancient mind. Final thoughts rattling around at the end of the line, with nothing to bounce them back to the source. Orphaned echoes.

What he planned to enact upon Will would be his heir’s salvation, no matter what became of Hannibal himself. For Will he would go down into the dark, not much caring if he came out again.



Will swung, his eyes unopened but not asleep, on a hook in the back of a truck on its way to Muskrat Farm.

All was agony, sharp and sparkling, and that was perfect. It meant Hannibal was close by. Will could feel wounds he did not himself possess, and when he did look, eyes thudding with the blood rushed to his head, he saw that these spectral hurts were mirrored on Hannibal’s body. Halfway somewhere else, like looking through someone else’s glasses with one eye, Will could feel the slightly off-kilter dissonance between his own trussed form, how it swayed, and Hannibal’s. Twisting gently, but noticeably, in counter-time.

Will could feel Hannibal’s placement in the world, the organic hum of his circulatory system, the not-sound of every eerie filament at its task.

Will was feeling his pain.

The truck rocked like a boat on the sea. The crunch of its wheels was repetitive and soothing, singing asphalt hymns, kicking up gravel prayers as it carried its sacrifice to a god of Industry.



As Hannibal bore his body across the snow, as Hannibal secured them transport back to Will's house in Wolf Trap, Will simply *felt*.

They didn't speak. Not because they didn't need to; there was much to say, almost too much. But after what had happened, after the crisp clarity of their joined suffering had formed a continuous loop, Will said nothing.

His back still quietly screamed, where Hannibal had been stuck with Mason's knife, where he had been branded. Hannibal's face still stung and felt cold air against naked muscle, where Will's had been cut.

Will decided, then, with every footfall in the snow, with every thud of his heart and Hannibal's, that he couldn't live like this. To be close to him was overexposure, the world too bright and loud and sharp. He couldn't bear the bone-deep tug that pulled them together by their every fiber, the unity. That it would mean he felt nothing, no matter. Will couldn't live like this.

Not anymore.



Hannibal lived on, in the climate-controlled cabinet that was his cell. Waiting to reemerge.

The time would come, someday soon, when Will would be capable of returning to him.

Chapter End Notes

for translation purposes, what chiyoh called hannibal, and what will didn't understand, was the phrase 真菌の王子.

sankaba

Chapter Summary

‘Married life looks good on you,’ said Molly.

‘Bias,’ said Will, tucking in his shirt. He had a flight to catch, back to the old stomping grounds. *Home again, home again, jiggy-jig.*

Chapter Notes

this chapter contains canonical levels of will/molly, which (let's be honest) is mostly banter.

Will could feel them singing in the air, felt their warmth and weight against his skin. He felt them calling out to him, and couldn't help but answer. He rose, breath shaking in his chest, and opened the drawer, and took out the envelope.

Touching it before, well, that had been painful. Accepting it, even with reluctance, had made Will doubt all that he'd struggled to achieve in this new life. He'd been good at hiding his pain, once, from ordinary people, but Molly could always spot it. Always caught him in the lie of *I'm fine*. And when Will had considered turning back to what had come before, accepted the revival of his personal curse, Molly had seen.

One night a few years ago, around the time that things had first got serious between them, Will had told her everything. Even the parts that defied rational explanation. Especially those.

‘O...kay,’ she'd said, leaning against the table with her elbows. They'd been sitting in her apartment kitchen, drinking hard cider that hadn't had time to get properly cold during dinner. ‘You want me to run screaming? Call you a crazy man?’

Will huffed a little self-conscious laugh, shaking his head. ‘No, I don't want that. Which is why I figure you should get it out of the way now, instead of finding out ten years down the line when I'm going bald and you'd have no reason to stick around.’

‘I love you for more than your fantastic hair, you know.’ Molly reached across the space between them and placed her hands over Will's. ‘Look, I know you've been through the wringer, Will. I'm not saying that's *why* I'm into you, because that'd be weird and gross. But it is part of who you are as a person. And if we're going to do more than this dancing-around-the-point stuff, you have to be willing to let me have the whole package.’

‘I thought you liked dancing,’ said Will, with a little smile. Deliberately obtuse.

Molly’s eyes sparkled as she gave him a dirty look. ‘To a *point*, wise guy.’ She let go of Will’s hands, crossed her arms. ‘Now, I believe that you can fast-forward time and think with other people’s brains, or whatever you want to call it. I couldn’t explain it even if I had ten hot research assistants and a lot of funding, but I believe it. Lot of people smarter than me have relied on you for things that you didn’t want to do. I just want to rely on what you actually *want* out of life, you know? And I believe in you. So I’m gonna go along with this whole... weird Lithuanian fairies thing.’

Will raised an eyebrow. ‘Oh, fairies? We’re calling it *fairies*, now?’

‘I don’t know what the hell else to call it. Do you?’

‘Nnno, actually. Huh.’ Will sat back in his chair.

‘Freaky Squirmy Mushroom Egg Mutant doesn’t have the same ring to it,’ Molly added. ‘That sounds more like one of Walter’s toys than it sounds like Hannibal.’

‘What are those ones where you pour goo into a mold and it makes a little wiggly monster or something?’ said Will.

‘Creepy Crawlers.’ Molly was holding back a laugh. ‘Are you calling yourself a plastic mold that Hannibal poured goo into?’

‘Maybe some other kind of mold,’ said Will. ‘Definitely a monster.’

‘Aww, come on, don’t sound so broken up about it. You’re a fun guy.’

Will and Molly stared each other down across the table.

‘Did you just,’ said Will.

‘I did.’

‘You’re terrible,’ said Will, unable to tamp down a laugh.

‘And by your reckoning, so are you. No wonder we work so well. Now, I’m gonna hop up and pour this cider over some ice because frankly I’m torturing myself, here. You want some?’

‘Sure.’

Molly got up, and in a second turned back around from reaching into the freezer, several cubes of ice held in her cupped hands. ‘Aaaahh! It’s so cold! Save me, Will!’

‘What—? You’re *ridiculous*,’ said Will in a rush, hopping up to grab a glass out of the cabinet so she could drop the ice into it.

‘Thank god you rescued me,’ said Molly, beaming with mischief.

It had all gone a lot better than Will could have hoped, and he wondered if part of himself hadn't wished that Molly *would* run screaming and leave him. He cared about her too much to subject her to what he'd become. But Molly, as it turned out, was too damn stubborn to be scared off by Will's bullshit, and far too convinced that he was a good man. They were weathering the storm of his past together, no matter the cost.

Yes, Jack bringing that old fear to darken his doorstep had been painful. But leaving something from Hannibal untouched for so long, when what Will knew was inside it waited patiently to coat his fingertips, his mouth, his lungs, *that* was agony.



'Married life looks good on you,' said Molly.

'Bias,' said Will, tucking in his shirt. He had a flight to catch, back to the old stomping grounds. *Home again, home again, jiggity-jig.*

'I'm permitted a certain level of bias, seeing as I'm the one who proposed.' Molly turned over in bed, stretching, not getting up. 'C'mere, scruffy.'

Will stopped what he was doing and turned, and Molly reached for him, resting a hand on his abdomen just above the buckle of his belt. There was a soft little bowing outward, there, like the crown of risen dough under a flour sack towel, peeking over the rim of its bowl.

'I know, I know,' said Will. 'I'm getting a paunch.'

'It's called Dad Bod, and it's cute,' said Molly, not moving her hand. 'Besides, isn't everybody allowed a window of like, fifteen pounds?'

'That's when you're a freshman in college,' said Will. 'And I think I *lost* about that much, then. Living on cereal.'

'I've seen pictures of you during your teaching days, you know,' Molly reminded him. 'Not that you weren't a dashing fairy tale prince, because of *course* you were, but you didn't look much better living on fish and mashed potatoes than you did in the cereal era. I'm glad somebody took it upon himself to feed you up.'

Will's expression tightened a fraction. 'Don't.' But he relaxed, stroking a lock of hair from her forehead.

'How do we know it's not...' Molly took her hand away but not in disgust, simply mindful of Will's comfort, 'that thing again? The one he put in you.'

'Pretty sure I'd remember eating another one of those,' said Will, sitting down on the edge of the bed to put his socks and shoes on. 'It's not as if I can grow my own.'



Will called from the motel, but there was no answer. He took a swig of whiskey, set his glass down, and felt the shape inside him move, as it had of old. He shifted uncomfortably, tried to

catch his breath. Laid down on top of the covers.

Molly was right, it couldn't be the same egg back again, could it? Will had watched it torn out of him, felt the snag and scream as it shredded free of its moorings, snapping like elastic over every nerve. He'd watched it land in grisly pieces on the floor, dissolve into the blood, into the air. But now, as he lay on an unfamiliar bed, he felt that old comfort returning:

Warmth and weight, as if he'd only just left Hannibal's presence of three years prior, as if the intervening hours and dulled realities of recovery and love and life had not dispelled the feeling. Warmth and weight, and *security*, and a thrill of arousal, its inviting tendril unwinding coil after coil within him.

Getting the old team back together, being near others who had been alongside Will before, who had seen at least a few stolen frames of the horror, that inviting ribbon that unfolded before him like the only path through a dark wood... Will could feel a twinge, there, that went beyond fondness or their shared history, went deeper than memory. A shiver of the neural network that linked them all. He could feel Hannibal's shadow over them as much as it lay over him.

Furtive despite his solitude, Will untucked his shirt slowly, in stages, fingers sliding over scar-warped skin. He did not move to touch where he might on some other occasion, hands stroking his stomach instead.

Will pressed the flat of his palm against his abdomen and his breath hitched at the feeling. Something unyielding there, just *there* where the heel of his palm kneaded, something smooth and *solid* in there, and he knew now what it meant.

Since Hannibal turned himself in, all Will had tried to do was regain some sort of normalcy. He went back to the alphabet book of his reality before Hannibal, before all of it: D was for dogs, several. L was for lonely, most nights. He knew the shape of these things, and they were familiar, easy to find again. He'd go to the farm down the road to refill his worn grey carton with *stepchildren*, retrieve Winston when he wandered off. He'd make his fishing flies. Sit at the piano with a drink. Sleep.

E was not for eggs, in his book. A was not for Abigail.

He'd felt next to nothing for a long time, in that he felt the yawning maw of nothingness always beside him, shadowing his every step, waiting for him to stumble. In time, with a lot of trial and error, Will relearned what happiness was supposed to feel like. He could understand pleasure, now, and pain too; even through the muffling gauze that had deadened his senses, through that funereal shroud, Will could recognize the shape of them out there, beyond the veil that shielded him.

In time, sensation began to return. He met Molly, started to build a new life with her. He could live like this, Will decided. His light just slightly dimmer than everyone else's. After all, what was the harm? He'd lived in the glare of suffering for too long, dilated and scooped hollow by the leavings of shattered lives. If Will Graham wanted to eschew excitement, no reasonable person could deny him that.

And that fragile peace would have held, perhaps forever, if only Will had known more reasonable people.

‘Oh, *god*,’ Will whispered, hips twitching as he finally allowed himself to enjoy it again, voice cracking the oath into pieces.

Miles away, Hannibal hummed quietly to himself in contentment, having felt the soft promise of Will’s acceptance once again. In time, with care and nourishment, the gift Will bore would grow stronger, strong enough for Will to pass on to his own heir. In time, and with enough exposure, Will would feel anew the strength of their connection, and Hannibal would be able to give him pleasure at any hour, soothe his pain. But for the moment Will was just out of reach, perhaps just a little frightened, and wading into a quiet stream of endorphins. And for now, that was enough.

Will lay, eyes not yet closed but closing, on his back on a bed in a cheap motel, arching as ever against nothing, full of a dream.



There’s something else I can do. I can wait until I’m driven to it by desperation...

Or I could do it now, while it might be of some use.

Will could almost see them, a blip of after-image when he moved his eyes. Stygian blue, too dark to exist. The color of death.

The corridor was thick with them, the air smoky and teeming with unseen haploid cells, ready to stick to any passerby and take root, borrowing their eyes, their sensory experience, their secrets. Teeming through those grand doors, into the anteroom that stood facing the great clear wall; evil old and new, facing each other in perpetuity. Neither was free.

While Will had thought the letter had been overpowering, the scent and taste of Hannibal’s presence here, fierce and relentlessly alive, was enough to make Will weak at the knees.

The room rocked like a boat on the sea. Will approached the glass.

marcher sur des œufs

Chapter Summary

Hannibal's fingers made a delicate sound as they slid across the surface of the file. 'Have you considered the possibility that he's disfigured? Or that he may believe he is disfigured?'

Will stopped short, as if he'd been struck. He arranged the mess of his expression into something cold and academic. 'That's interesting.'

'Is there a child in your life, Will?' said Hannibal, haltingly. He had thought he was prepared for this, had thought of little else, but now that he faced Will, it was hard to swallow, hard to breathe. 'I gave you a child, if you recall.'

All Will had needed was patience. Patience and trust, but Will couldn't even give him that.

'You just came here to look at me. Came to get the old scent again,' said Hannibal, a fine sheen of contempt over his words. 'Why don't you just smell yourself?'

Will flinched, looking away with a faint gasp of pain. Hannibal felt the clutch of Will's heart, the regret and shame and hope that dropped into his stomach like hot stone. He could feel it again.

Good.



Blood rituals involve a symbolic death and then a rebirth. As with all things in the natural world, you'll adapt now, and mutate later.

'How would you have done it? If you were going to do it.'

Hannibal looked up from the jar into which Abigail's blood was pooling. 'How would I have murdered you?' He absorbed her expression before he continued. 'I would have cut your throat like your father did.'

Abigail shivered, her eyes bright and dilated, the faintest smile on her lips. Something like excitement. A little twitch of a smirk at the corner of her mouth. Hannibal could hear the roar of her life filling the room.

'But you're not my father,' she said. Challenging.

'You accepted your father,' Hannibal reminded her. 'Would it be so difficult to accept me?'

Are you ready to die, Abigail?

A smile, a nod, a shallow breath.

Yes.

A dance, slow and safe, washed of the frantic cries of memory.

Abigail Hobbs is dead.

Long live Abigail Hobbs.



Alana lounged, deceptively at ease. ‘How did it feel to see him again?’

Will’s shaky breath was answer enough, heralding the timbre of his reply. ‘Like,’ halting over the name as if he dare not speak it, ‘Hannibal was looking through to the back of my skull.’ He glanced at her, felt the flat, presumptive understanding in her expression, looked away, shivering. ‘Felt like... a fly, flitting around in there.’ Will swallowed. It was a strange comfort to tell her the truth, even when it meant something else entirely. ‘I had the absurd feeling that he walked out with me. Had to stop outside the doors and look around, make sure I was alone.’ He laughed at himself.

He *knew* he hadn’t been alone.



‘This is a very shy boy, Will. I’d love to meet him.’

‘I’m sure you would,’ said Will, who had been a shy boy once. It stung a little.

Hannibal’s fingers made a delicate sound as they slid across the surface of the file. ‘Have you considered the possibility that he’s disfigured? Or that he may believe he is disfigured?’

Will stopped short, as if he’d been struck. He arranged the mess of his expression into something cold and academic. ‘That’s interesting.’

Oh, that brought out the old smile, the minute repositioning of the eyelids, brought out from where it had slept, wrapped in silk and waiting for Will to need it again. ‘That’s not interesting.’

I don’t find you that interesting.



Sleep eluded Will, a criminal fleeing the scene.

You know better than to breed. Can’t pass on those terrible traits you fear the most.

Will realized he was cradling the little swell of the shape in his abdomen, and quickly moved his hands away.

He sat up, picked up his phone.

'Hello, hotshot! Doin' some good?'

Relief flooded Will at once, grateful for the familiar comfort of Molly's voice. He was getting too comfortable with what used to be familiar. The bodies. The blood.

But M was for Molly.

○○○

Abigail sat with her eyes covered, trusting out of love.

'We have a basic affinity for our family,' said Hannibal, crossing to stand before her. 'We can detect each other by smell alone.'

'I can smell you,' said Abigail. She could feel the tingle of something against her skin, in her nose, her throat.

'What else can you smell? The dead and the past can be far more alive to us than the breathing here and now. They shape our lives, unless we absorb them.'

'What if I don't know how to absorb them?'

Hannibal smiled, unseen, but she could hear it in his voice. 'You will.'

○○○

Hannibal thought back over his conversation. Such a shy boy, indeed, daring all only to reach for him.

What particular body you currently occupy is trivial.

While it wasn't ideal, it was useful. A glimmering trap to lure his own shy boy back to where he belonged.

○○○

If he was really trying to stop, he's not going to kill himself.

The shape in Will shifted, stretched.

How could he be sure his death would affect whatever's inside him?

○○○

Will sat on the edge of Molly's hospital bed, listening to the unnatural hum and hiss of the machines.

Out of all the wounds he had endured, hers were the worst. Though he could only sense her physical pain in a dull and distant way, shadows behind a scrim, Will felt acutely the betrayal and the fear, the loss.

She hadn't done anything wrong. *Everyone else* had, if Will allowed himself to rationalize it, and right now he needed something to hold onto. Everyone else had done something wrong. Everyone he loved who had been through hell, there was a reason. Even Abigail. But not Molly. Molly had been good, and pure, and whole. Her only misstep was loving someone like Will. They'd had a good life, a stable life, but not anymore. Not now that Will tracked his black and bloody dirt across it.

His nerves twanged painfully, leaving a metallic taste in his mouth, and Will winced, closing his eyes. Every fibril in him longed to reach out to her, to breach his skin as if it were as permeable as water, twist over her wounded body and heal her, stitch every tear back together. She was a part of him, if only by association. She more than anyone, now, had taken in enough of his spores for him to sense her moods, her little aches, her enthusiasms. Her fear. Will had felt the cold nausea of terror clawing up his insides when his adversary had been at the house, and Will had focused every last bit of determination and training he had—not knowing if it would do any good, if these connections even *worked* that way—so that Molly would know what to do, and not simply panic and run blindly.

It shouldn't have been this way at all.

When Molly woke, Will woke. He sat forward, keeping a tight rein on the tendrils that still sought to rise from within him and mend her. He sniffed, pressed his lips together. The lie of *I'm fine*.



He didn't murder those families. He changed them.

A lurch within them both, though they stood still. The air heavy with promise, or denial.

Don't you crave change, Will?



Reality tipped and spun like a ship in the tempest.

'Is Hannibal in love with me?'

'Could he daily feel a stab of hunger for you, and find nourishment at the very sight of you?' Cold, measured reply, calculated to wound, as if Bedelia knew. *As if she'd always known.* 'Yes.'

What in god's name was he supposed to do, now?

khai yat sai

Chapter Summary

‘Have you been marking me as yours this whole time?’ said Will, his voice barely above a whisper, enjoying being examined physically by Hannibal as much as he’d enjoyed it psychologically. (Which is to say, more than he cared to admit.) ‘Sewing a tag with your name on it under my collar?’

‘It’s served me well,’ said Hannibal, fingers trailing along the skin just over the scar on Will’s abdomen, cautious of the shape inside, not yet drawing attention to it directly. But his avoidance was attention enough. ‘Every time you have been found, someone has returned you to me.’

Chapter Notes

this chapter contains The Cliff Scene. but do not despair, readers; their story doesn't end there.

You know, Will, you worry too much. You’d be so much more comfortable if you relaxed with yourself.



Upon reaching the house, Hannibal excused himself to take a proper shower, with as much hot water as he wanted, soap that didn’t smell of industrial cleaner, and that exquisite luxury that even his cleverest dealings with BSHCI’s ruling tyrants had not afforded him: privacy.

Will, for his part, wandered around.

Some craving in him for familiarity posited that any safehouse of Hannibal’s would be as similar to his former home as possible, but that wasn’t the case here. True, Hannibal’s favor of mid-century modern design was in evidence, brought to fore in this place by its architecture and the open feeling of its rooms as well as the decor; whereas Dr Lecter’s Baltimore office and home had been more opulent, grander, a nod to mid-century panache shining through in the silhouette of a chair, the taper of table legs, and a fondness for teak. Still there was a richness here, in form and quality, and if Will had been led to this place and asked of whom it reminded him, Hannibal would have been his first response. It was the difference between brocade and barkcloth, and both were equally striking in their appropriate environs.

A little twinge of memory, here, also: Abigail's shadow. It was almost as if Will could trace her steps through the house, knew where she lingered. Here across this sofa she lay, reading; here she stood, admiring the night. A little cross-stitched sampler in a frame above a roll-top desk, which bore the marks of her so bright Will could almost hear her voice. Scrolling vines, or something like them, in a periwinkle blue, framing the verse:

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,

And our hearts, though stout and brave,

Still, like muffled drums, are beating

Funeral marches to the grave.

The breath of her existence fogged against the window of Will's mind, and dissipated.

He couldn't help but smile as he heard Hannibal humming in the shower down the hall, a snatch of some sonata Will couldn't place.



'The words *monster* and *demonstrate* are neighbors in their original Latin,' said Hannibal, his lips soft and faintly cool against Will's neck.

Will tried to think of how they'd gotten here, to this moment, but it reached back and back for years, impossible to place a pin upon the instant it became their fate.

Hannibal's voice purred beneath Will's ribs.

'*Portentum* can mean either a monstrosity, or a prophetic warning. A demonstration of something beyond our ability to countenance.'

'Are you honestly going to delve into dead languages right now?' Will slid his hands down Hannibal's sides, found they were sensitive, and exploited that discovery, making him gasp. 'At a time like this?' A short breath, a one-note laugh. 'Tedious.'

Hannibal kissed him quiet. 'It's only fair. You have decided the topic of our conversation since the beginning.'

'Maybe because that was therapy. I distinctly remember being asked what I wanted to discuss.'

'It wasn't always therapy, Will.' Hannibal reminded him. The towel that had hung from his hips dropped to the floor, though Hannibal paid it no mind. 'St Augustine wrote that such things as humanity commonly views as an abomination before God are actually His miracles, proof of His knowledge of beauty surpassing our own. In those who look or behave in a way that rasps against the feelings of the masses, God's aesthetic preferences can be seen.'

Will kissed his way down the center line of Hannibal's torso, folding to his knees as gracefully as he could. 'So we're all ugly ducklings? Or rather, we should hope we are?'

‘Ah, but he had always been a swan. We are better served making our home among the things that sleep down in the mud. The point was that all people house immortal souls, no matter how they appear.’ Hannibal slid his fingers through Will’s curls, enjoying the silk of them. ‘Extraordinary mutation from the common mien is a demonstration of God’s... power... that’s *very* good, Will.’

‘Mmhm,’ Will noised.

Hannibal continued to make his point, thoroughly enjoying what a distraction Will was being. ‘As people, we presume a great deal about our own understanding, when in truth we grasp very little. Our hands are too small to carry the bowl of the universe.’ He tipped his head back, sighing, shifting his hips just a fraction of an inch forward, and Will’s response—both in sound and movement—was that of eager encouragement. ‘We think that what is beautiful is good for us. You remember. And thus we believe that a deity who purports to show us love and forgiveness *must* be present in the beautiful. The soft gradient of color in the petals of a flower. A sunset, the joy of a child. Certain music. These fine features we attribute to the face of God.’

Will made a little noise in the back of his throat.

‘Does it trouble you that I’m speaking, Will?’ Hannibal looked down with mischief in his eyes. ‘I recall Margot telling me you were the silent type.’

A shift in position, settling back on his heels, and Will was free to speak, his lips plush and swollen from their work. ‘Conversation is by necessity one-sided when my mouth is busy.’ He sat forward again, nuzzling the join of Hannibal’s hip and thigh. ‘Please, go on. You were saying, about the face of God?’

‘We fool ourselves,’ Hannibal said, warming again to his theme, ‘into thinking that our ideals and His are the same. We can scarcely grasp the fierce and staggering totality of His image, or worse, we are blind to it and curse it. I like what you’re doing, Will.’

Will answered by dragging blunt nails down the back of Hannibal’s thighs, making him sigh a little with that additional edge of pleasure. Will felt the echo of abrasion against his own skin.

‘All in all, our experience of beauty is determined by what we have been designed to appreciate. If we go against type, if we choose the bruised apple or the strange egg, we show our capacity to learn. Our understanding need not cease when it gropes its way to the edge of our instincts.’

Will rocked back to take a few deep breaths. ‘Things can be set to a lot of tasks they weren’t designed to do.’ He seemed fascinated by the dip of Hannibal’s left hipbone, stroking his thumb in the slight hollow, back and forth. His voice was soft, and a little distant. ‘A priceless book can shore up a wobbly table, or prop open a door. Function beats form.’

Hannibal seemed to need to catch his breath, too. He took a moment before he replied. ‘But you cannot read a doorstep. Given the choice, I would much prefer the book, even if this

meant at some later time I must use it against its purpose.’ He cupped Will’s face, his thumb sweeping over Will’s cheekbone: a characteristic gesture. ‘May I kiss you again?’

Will got to his feet. ‘What, you want to taste yourself?’

‘I could do that any time. What I want to taste is myself in complement to you.’

Hannibal kissed him, unhurried, reveling in their closeness. They had all the time in the world, stretching forward and back.

Will’s pupils were blown wide, his breath shallow. A dash of color in his cheeks and a click as he swallowed, when their lips parted. ‘Laid over me like a shadow. Features still visible, if hard to make out.’

Hannibal began to kiss along Will’s jaw. ‘Or like a veil.’

‘I’m not that modest.’ Will tilted his head to accommodate the affection, happy to be coaxed where Hannibal wanted him, ‘though lately I’ve been referred to as your bride.’ Will’s lips tugged to one side in a wry smile. ‘*Twice*. Would your veil obscure me from judgement? Hide my face at our immoral feast?’

‘I never wished to obscure you, Will. Show you off, perhaps, when the veil was drawn away.’

‘Show me off?’ Will shook his head a little, and Hannibal saw in Will’s expression the outlines of a silent laugh. ‘Show me up, is more like it. You’re always *testing* me, pushing me away so I’ll come running back. Believe me, I know who twitches the strings to make me dance.’

Hannibal turned them, backed Will up against the wall Hannibal had been leaning against. Boxed him in. ‘Would you rather I sat back and allowed you to show off for me, yourself?’

He felt the hitch of breath in Will’s chest, and stepped back a little to see him better, look him up and down while still maintaining Will’s tacit captivity against the wall.

Will’s eyes glancing back and forth between Hannibal’s own, then to Hannibal’s lips. The preface of a kiss, in another light. But Will was frowning, then smiling in bemusement. ‘Do you have something in your mouth?’

‘Only tongue and teeth and breath, at the moment,’ said Hannibal. ‘More’s the pity.’

‘Liar. There’s something—’ Will peered closer, then comprehension dawned and he slowly leaned back again. ‘Something’s *glowing*, in there.’

‘Oh?’ Hannibal looked purposefully surprised.

‘Not the... it’s different from what you leave in a room,’ said Will. ‘Spores, I’ve been assuming.’

‘Yes,’ said Hannibal. ‘Very good.’

‘Those are like fingermarks in the air, to let me know where you’ve been. Hard to see, but I feel them. The aftermath of your leaving. Black, but not black. I think only I can see them.’ Will was transfixed by Hannibal’s lips, unable to look away. ‘But this is emitting light. It flickers, but...’ He trailed off.

‘Bioluminescence,’ said Hannibal. ‘It manifests alongside sexual arousal. You’ve got it, as well. Look.’ He held up his hand near Will’s mouth, palm cupped as if helping Will check his breath for the ghost of alcohol. Will could see a faint glow reflected onto Hannibal’s fingers.

‘Oh,’ said Will, breathless, not sure what to think. ‘How long have I *had* that? Can other people see?’

‘They can if they’re paying attention, and not long,’ said Hannibal, stroking a loose curl back from Will’s forehead. ‘A few years, at the outside.’

‘Hannibal, I’ve been *married* for a few years.’ Will tripped over that, after he had said it, and fought down a surge of melancholy at the state of things.

‘Yes, and has your wife ever drawn your attention to it?’

Will’s jaw was tense, but he made an effort to relax it. ‘No.’

‘Or indeed to any of your other peculiar features?’

The tension broke. ‘I’m *all* peculiar features.’ Will rested his hands on Hannibal’s hips once more, feeling odd that Hannibal was naked but Will was still fully clothed. Odd, yes, but there was something right about it, just now. Will had always felt stripped bare in Hannibal’s presence; turnabout’s fair play. ‘No, she never said a word.’

‘Must have assumed you were shy about it,’ said Hannibal. ‘As you generally are, about your finer qualities.’

‘I think it’s more likely that Molly assumed it was part of the whole creepy fairy tale package.’

‘And what tale would that be, Will?’ Hannibal gave him a serious look, a different sort of scrutiny than Will had felt from him in a long time.

‘The kind with monsters,’ said Will. A hint of bitterness, there. ‘Poised to set upon the unwary and tear them apart, should they stray too far from goodness. A beast that doesn’t turn back into a prince, because he never was one.’

Hannibal’s eyes held an old sadness, some heirloom thing that burdened its inheritor. ‘There are far more stories than those that have been recorded,’ he said, then changed the tone. ‘You are wearing far too many clothes, I think.’

In stages Will was undressed, Hannibal lavishing each uncovered inch of him with attention, curious fingers skimming just over scars but not touching them, maintaining distance as if from some holy artifact.

‘This one’s mine, and this one,’ said Hannibal as he explored, ‘and this, here, is mine by proxy.’

‘Have you been marking me as yours this whole time?’ said Will, his voice barely above a whisper, enjoying being examined physically by Hannibal as much as he’d enjoyed it psychologically. (Which is to say, more than he cared to admit.) ‘Sewing a tag with your name on it under my collar?’

‘It’s served me well,’ said Hannibal, fingers trailing along the skin just over the scar on Will’s abdomen, cautious of the shape inside, not yet drawing attention to it directly. But his avoidance was attention enough. ‘Every time you have been found, someone has returned you to me.’

Will was trembling, pressing forward into Hannibal’s touch, eager for it there more than anywhere else. ‘Why did you do it?’

Hannibal knew what he meant. He pulled Will to him, and turned him, to press against Will’s now-shirtless back, arms wrapped around him from behind, hands framing the scar, cradling it. ‘You needed to survive.’

Will tipped his head back against Hannibal’s shoulder. ‘It would have killed me if you’d left it?’

‘Survival should not be dictated by how many times a stronger creature intervenes on one’s behalf,’ said Hannibal. ‘Such a reliance would be to tamper with the motivation to evolve.’

‘You once said you favored pure mutualism over other types of relationship,’ said Will.

Hannibal nodded. ‘That’s true. Come to bed.’



‘As you seem to think it’s fair game to bring up former lovers in these situations,’ said Will a few minutes later, lounging on a bed in the jewel darkness of a beautiful room, while Hannibal retrieved something from a drawer, ‘did Alana ever notice your... bioluminescence?’

‘She preferred to close her eyes,’ said Hannibal, the surface of the bed dipping from his weight as he returned to it.

‘Literally or figuratively?’

‘Both, I shouldn’t wonder.’ Hannibal opened a matte black bottle and poured something slow and thick into his hand. ‘Sometimes I covered them for her.’

‘I’ll keep my eyes open, thanks.’ Will leaned back against his elbows, watching Hannibal move. ‘I don’t want to miss anything.’ He shifted a little as Hannibal straddled him where he reclined, breath catching, biting his lip in anticipation. ‘Why did you give me your gift in the first place, only to take it away?’

‘You still have it.’ Hannibal’s words were a low murmur, as if not to distract Will at that moment. With a slow easing-down of Hannibal’s hips, Will was sheathed in him, and he stilled. ‘The egg was only the wrapping, in which the gift waited for you to accept it,’ he whispered, his posture lax and comfortable, voice edged under the surface with a moan. ‘You adapted.’

Will watched the flicker of pulse in the column of Hannibal’s throat, felt it ticking in time with the pulse of heat around him now. And down the length of Hannibal’s body, along his sides, across his chest, and every place that could be deemed erogenous, the blue-white glow that lit his mouth shone forth in a twinkling pattern there. Constellations of an unknown sky, ancient and portentous.

‘*Changeling*,’ said Will, the word swimming up from some buried thought, possibly not his own.

‘You crossed my threshold, took food and wine I offered,’ said Hannibal, beginning the gentle rolling of his hips so that he might bury Will anew just as deeply as the first thrust. ‘Children of wise parents know not to do these foolish things.’

Will laughed, and the soft movement of where they were joined made Will bite his lip, eyes falling closed for a moment. ‘I guess I wasn’t raised right.’

‘There’s no shame in needing additional tutelage,’ said Hannibal. ‘Those who are stolen away are chosen because they were not properly cared for. Are you enjoying yourself?’

‘*God*,’ Will ground out through clenched teeth as Hannibal tensed around him. Will could feel every impulse from Hannibal’s nerves as well as his own, a seamless loop, and Will couldn’t have explained where he ended and Hannibal began. ‘What kind of a question is that?’

‘An honest one,’ was his good-natured reply. ‘It would be terribly remiss of me to fuck myself upon you if you’d rather I be doing something else.’

A blush suffused Will’s cheeks, traveling down his neck and chest in a tingling wave of heat when the obscenity met the air. He had never heard Hannibal curse; it was like not knowing someone had a beautiful singing voice until, quite unexpectedly, you caught them at it. Hannibal speaking on any topic at all had been enough to make him spark with interest and what-ifs, but now...

‘Ah, I see that pleased you,’ Hannibal said with a touch of amusement, leaning to support himself with his hands as Will’s hips bucked and unsteadied him.

‘What am I, right now?’ Will managed to say.

‘If you mean in the context of sexual dominance or submission, I hardly think such considerations need apply.’ Hannibal sat back again, rising and falling in a smooth and cyclic measure, his hands occupied with teasing Will’s nipples. ‘What we are, as dictated by ordinary terms, is of no consequence.’

‘What if I want there to be ordinary terms? Oh— *god*, yes—like that.’

‘You left ordinary behind a long time ago, Will. Look at yourself.’

Will let his attention waver from Hannibal’s expression, and realized that his own hands were dappled with light, fine threads and freckles of it up his arms, along his chest. A focus of the glow like a spotlight from within, central to his abdomen.

‘You are at your most beautiful when you allow yourself to luxuriate in your monstrosity.’ Hannibal’s voice was halting, now, as Will’s was, nearing some edge beyond which was a fathomless mystery.

Will was shaking, now, voice hoarse with the effort of speaking through the tide of sensation. ‘What is it? *What have you done?*’

‘Come for me, Will,’ said Hannibal, and made certain he did.



Will lay, eyes open and unafraid, on his back, in a bed, in the arms of Hannibal Lecter. Night fell, black and inevitable beyond the windows. The world paused, waiting.

‘Tell me a story,’ said Will.

Deep in the wood, before there were creatures that walked about, a mighty king did sleep. And in his sleep, he dreamed of time that had not yet come to pass. Fire, and flood, and battle. This troubled him, and he feared for what was to befall his grand palace, the forest. So he fashioned a blade of starlight and cut from himself the shape of an heir, and sent him out into the world, to see what would become of him.

‘He sent his son into that mess?’ said Will. ‘Knowing full well he’d be hurt, or even killed?’

‘He didn’t know for certain,’ said Hannibal. ‘He was curious what would happen.’

The prince was beautiful, and a liar. All those he touched fell before him, some in death, others in fearful worship, still others in love. But in his eagerness to be free of his past, the prince had strayed too far from his father’s lands, and without the feast of rich black soil at the royal table, he grew weak, too weak to shield himself from the horrors his father had envisioned. Wounded in battle, the prince crept along the ground, his heart’s blood sinking deep into the dirt, and there he lay, and perished.

‘Who precisely is the protagonist of this story?’ said Will.

‘Hush,’ Hannibal murmured, kissing Will’s temple. ‘Listen.’

Up from the ground where his blood had splashed, little sprouts reached up toward the heavens, to mend the prince’s body, and to feast upon those who were dead. In the fullness of time, the prince rose again, and returned to his father, beckoned home by his father’s calling.

I have come from the world beyond our borders, said the prince.

And what have you found? said the king.

It is full up with warring, said the prince; all men are choked with enmity and many a meaningless evil. Despite knowing I should turn away, in the end I could not resist it, and I was slain.

It is a blessing that you have returned, said the king. You are never to leave my side again.

Yes, father, said the prince, and slew him.

‘Was he so tainted by the violence of the world that he saw no other choice?’ Will asked, a little miffed, shifting onto his side to look at him. ‘Why not just listen to the king, and stay?’

‘You’ll have your answer,’ said Hannibal.

‘Did he kill his father so they could be together, then?’ Will pressed. ‘Since the prince was dead, and now the king, it stands to reason.’

‘But the prince came back to life, Will.’

He prodded Hannibal in the side. ‘This is all very flimsy, you realize. Why can’t the king just do the same?’

‘If you’ll let me continue...?’

‘Sure. But I’m considering this story to be highly suspect.’

The prince could not bear to remain in the dark wood, all alone save for his father who made him, for the world was too full of beauty. True, there was fire, and flood, and battle, but so too was there art, and music, and pleasurable company. And so, having slain his father, the prince was now the king, and the king could do as he pleased. In the dark he ate his father’s heart, so that the one who made him could not return.

He went out into the world, and enjoyed the fine things it offered him. But by and by, the new king grew distant, and went back to the wood to be alone. He wept his loneliness into the soil, for he was singular in all that lived, the only one of his deathless kind, for he had slain his father and eaten him. So he fashioned a blade of moonlight and cut from himself the shape of an heir.

‘I’m beginning to see a pattern,’ said Will, drawing a circle with his fingertip on Hannibal’s chest. ‘Cyclic tragedies aren’t really my cup of tea.’

‘You surprise me, Will,’ said Hannibal, with a faint and teasing smile.

The prince was beautiful, and a liar—

‘Shall I tell the rest? I think I know it.’

Hannibal raised his eyebrows, made a little gesture. ‘Oh, by all means sing if you know the words.’

All those he touched fell before him, some in death, others in fearful worship, still others in love. But in his eagerness to be free of his father's possessive hold, the prince strayed back to the woods, where his father dared not follow. The prince did this because he wanted to know from whence his father had come, and he was curious what might happen.

'You're doing quite well,' said Hannibal.

'Hush,' said Will.

There the prince met the ghost of his father: the first king.

I know what you are, said the ghost of the king. My heir betrayed me, and you are of his kind. If you bring him to me so that I might kill him, you shall be *my* prince, and I will teach you all that your father, my son, has kept secret.

'I suspect you have heard this before,' said Hannibal. 'But I fear no one told you the ending. May I pick up again?'

'Of course,' said Will.

Despite his disdain for his father's protectiveness, the prince understood that it was out of love, and a fear of losing his love, that the king had so jealously guarded him. And so he turned from the ghost and fled.

Little knowing how to return to his father after what he had done, the prince went out again into the world alone. But by and by, as all fell before him, the prince fell also. And so he fashioned a blade of tears and cut from himself the shape of an heir, so that even in the prince's leaving, his father the king would not be alone.

'Is that the end?' said Will, after a moment of listening to Hannibal's heartbeat.

'Yes and no,' said Hannibal, watching Will's expression.

'That's a terrible ending,' said Will, with a laugh, moving to lay propped up on his elbows. 'Fit for a terrible story.'

'Terrible stories sometimes teach us the most,' Hannibal said, with the tone of one who had reminded others before. 'About those who tell them, naturally, but also about those who indulge their telling.'

Will looked down at his hands, fidgeting with a stray thread from the pillowcase. 'Are you saying that by observing some painful thing without making it stop, a person is complicit in whatever the conclusion may be?'

'Wouldn't you?' Hannibal smiled. 'I'm not placing blame, Will. I simply mean that there is always a moment when one could turn away.'

'Like the first prince?' said Will. 'Murder the king and high-tail it for the hills? I'll pass.'

'You've gone that way before,' Hannibal teased him.

Will let out a long breath. ‘So have you.’

Hannibal inclined his head, acknowledging the remark. *Touché*. ‘But we told this story together, Will, singing each to each. Perhaps, when we find ourselves in another fairy tale,’ he said, ‘you can decide the ending.’



They moved in eerie synchrony, impulses firing as one, so that if Hannibal thought of a step to take, but could not take it, Will would; if Will could strike but needed Hannibal to keep the dragon steady, Hannibal knew at the speed of Will’s very thought. Each knew how to move, how to protect and defend the other, for they felt every blow in perfect unison, a mutual dolorimetry. Perfect union and communication at last.

And when their foe lay slain upon the ground, they rose together, loath to be apart for even a moment, clutching for each other.

‘See?’

Will shook with every beat of their disparate hearts.

‘This is all I ever wanted for you, Will,’ said Hannibal, ‘for both of us.’ And in the moonlight Will saw thousands of luminescent strands emerge, drawing Hannibal’s spilled blood back to its source like minuscule pipettes; and in the parted flesh, raw with pain that Will felt in perfect mirror to Hannibal’s own, bright threads aglow with life stitched closed the wounds, leaving pleasure in their wake.

And as for Will himself, his own black filaments began to manifest, surging forth in waves, urgent at their mending. And all around them swirled the widening gyre, alight with spores, not blue, not black; the after-blink of life against the velvet night.

‘It’s beautiful.’

The finest of their limbs entwined, helical embraces tugging, drawing them nearer, still nearer. Will could not think of anything purer than this moment, no greater sparkling intensity than this revelation, and almost precisely when the thought had coalesced he felt Hannibal’s own mind ring with reply:

Yes. Yes.

Down, over the edge, out into the chilled and waiting air. Falling and releasing what frail flesh could no longer hold, the blinding glow of what dwelt within them, scouring bright across the dark as their twinned vision faded, observing their descent through shared eyes.

epilogue: île flottante

Chapter Summary

In a house camouflaged from prying eyes, a woman sat down at a harpsichord with the Goldberg Variations.

‘I know these were your favorite,’ she said to the air. ‘I’ve been practicing.’

The air listened.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,

Would it have been worth while,

To have bitten off the matter with a smile,

To have squeezed the universe into a ball

To roll it towards some overwhelming question,

To say: “I am Lazarus, come from the dead,

Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all”—

- *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, T.S. Eliot

In a house at the edge of the world, a woman bathed and dressed.

Some, in isolation for so long, would become restless. Cabin fever, or something like it. Some would be desperate to hear another’s voice issue from a human throat, not simply from a speaker. But the lack of contact didn’t bother the woman at all. She had everything that she needed. And someone she trusted had once assured her that talking to oneself, and those who weren’t there, was completely natural.

In a house of perpetual mourning, a woman prepared breakfast.

There was something farcical about funerals, she’d always thought. The stately, regimented procession. The fine clothes and somber music. The weeping of those who were the sort to weep, or those who wished to be seen doing so. The cloying choke of refrigerated flowers.

All was vanity. Western practices had been largely manufactured, pomp and profit and promises of life beyond; she'd read a great deal of books on the subject. She'd had plenty of time.

They injected you with all *sorts* of stuff, for no damn reason but appearances. They filled you with preservatives like a laboratory specimen, then tucked you out of sight. It would be kinder to keep you in a jar, charge a quarter to be viewed and gasped at behind a curtain at a sawdust carnival. What was the point of all that labor, all that makeup and posing and being propped up with splints, when nobody was even going to look at you for more than a minute? They stuck barbed caps under your eyelids so they'd stay pert and rounded even as the sockets sank hollow with decay. *Well, at least she doesn't **look** all that dead.* Such a grand show, all claiming to be for the sake of the departed, who, having left, weren't around to enjoy it. No matter how deep they planted you, there was a distinctly shallow quality to the grave.

It was better to have honesty in death. Leave falsehood and mockery to the living.

Those she mourned weren't around to enjoy *her* rituals, either, but that wasn't due to them being dead. It was because they needed rest. It was because they hadn't all come home yet. Maybe they didn't know how.

In a house with no address, a woman did the washing-up.

When she'd first come to this place, she wandered for hours, peering into every room. Picking things up and putting them down. She ventured down into the dark chambers of the basement and sub-basement, the vast array of things that lay in wait for her. Knotted bundles of herbs, bars of castile soap, glass jars of broths and preserves by the hundreds. Toothbrushes, combs, blankets and pillows. Freezers stocked with meats, and dishes prepared in advance, each with its own beautifully-lettered card of ingredients and instructions. Coolers full of juices and wine. The sleepy hum of whatever kept them going. The work of many years that knew a storm would come. And up above in the main house, in the parlor, a vast and staggering library of sheet music, to be played upon the instruments there.

In a house where only one voice ever spoke, a woman sat down to her needlework.

It was the sort of hobby that allowed one a great deal of time to think. The slow, measured repetition calling memory up from its slumber. Coiling vines, or something like them, in a delicate blue, framing the verse:

Let us, then, be up and doing,

With a heart for any fate;

Still achieving, still pursuing,

Learn to labor and to wait.

In a house with a hidden garden, a woman went out into the balmy morning to retrieve the delivery.

Every third day, a teenaged boy from a nearby dairy would drive along a pitted dirt path and into a forest. The road abruptly stopped at a stone marker, no more than a slab of raw granite stood up in the earth like some ancient monument, heavily clung with moss and mushrooms. Here, the boy would leave the order: a small portion each of whole milk, butter (salted and virgin), heavy cream, sour cream, yogurt.

With these he also left a dozen eggs from a nearby farm, weird ones in all kinds of colors you didn't see in the store, some with ripples or bumps or things that looked like scars. The man at the farm called them *stepchildren*, or *uglies*, and said that since his elderly father had passed and the dark-haired man with glasses had ceased to come by, there didn't seem to be much demand for them. *Let's hope they're going to a good home*, he said with a smile as the dairy boy played with the new litter of puppies. They were schnauzers mixed with something, russet brindled with black and a penchant for wandering. Sometimes the farmer would have to go off down the road a ways and he'd always find them at that boarded-up place, the one with the fairy rings in the yard.

He told his little daughter not to go down that way, because that's what you told children out in the country when there were fairy rings about. The workaday paganism of your old grandmother, or an aunt, or your mother far-gone with the madness of age, her Scotch-Irish fingerprints all over your alphabet book of reality: put the first loaf of the harvest in the ploughed field, leave milk at the door in the night, carry a scrap of bread or a little salt in your pocket, and don't step into a ring upon the ground. Didn't matter what you believed in otherwise, Almighty God or ghosts or the Large Hadron Collider. No matter how much you bucked superstition and could walk under a ladder any day of the week, something deep in your Southern heart knew that a ring upon the ground wasn't to be trusted. Best to leave them alone, and not track their strange issue across the land of decent people.

The dairy boy's father told him not to ask questions about the path, or the stone, or the woods, or who ate what was offered there. All he needed to know was that there was good money in it, money that was going to send him to college, and provide for the boy's own family once he married and made one. Best to leave it alone.

In a house camouflaged from prying eyes, a woman sat down at a harpsichord with the Goldberg Variations.

'I know these were your favorite,' she said to the air. 'I've been practicing.'

The air listened.

They were all dead, she knew. It had been explained to her in a comforting way, in the empty kitchen of a dead house, far from here.

Though disaster might strike blow after blow to the body and the mind, the little gifts I have given them will mend what breaks. They came to me in my own house, supped at my table, slept in my arms. They came to me with their delights and with their pain, and as I rejoiced with them and soothed them, they breathed.

They partook of it unknowingly, I admit, but it was better for them to do so. It gives them strength to feel that they were fighters, that against all odds they had it within them to survive

such grievous suffering. They did have it in them, of course.

A little smile.

They had you in them, she had said.

They had my love, yes, and my protection. Even those who would deny it. And a few whom I would deny with words, I'm sorry to say, though their survival shows the truth of the matter. I care for them, in my own way. I made them a part of my life, and thus made my life a part of them.

What happens when it's time for them to die? she had asked.

Their bodies already did, he told her. *In the way that humans die. But they carry me with them, and I flipped on the switch again, just as I was given the power to control my own. I have no intention of stopping.*

The thing about fungi, the woman learned, is that they are incredibly hard to kill. Crush them, drown them, slice them to ribbons as you might, the same little cluster would keep coming back, because deep in the soil, or the wood, or the walls, there slept its heart, hidden in the dark.

She had been chosen, had not only breathed him in, but consumed a part of him as well. A fraction of his essence, imbibed in tea.

She could not be his heir, but she had been allowed to wait for the one that *was*. She had consumed what he offered her, willingly, despite her apprehension, and because of that, death was only a door through which to pass into another pleasant chamber. She could cross the threshold back and forth as often as she wished. Up through the black dirt and dead leaves she had risen, whole and clean and white. And when she sought the thrumming source of their connection, he had gone, but not without leaving her instructions, and a map.

She had been told to take what was hers and to eat it. It felt like sacrilege, almost, to cook the gift; she had never eaten one, herself, only watched someone else eat his own. (*To enjoy the surplus*, he told her, *is the chef's prerogative.*) So before she went about her work, before doing all things needful to save them, she stood in the cold, hair thrashed about by the wind, and ate it as she found it, blood painting her face and hands. Drips of black yolk sucked down into the sand.

There were things she hoped to show them both, things she had learned, but mostly she wanted to express her gratitude for what her protector had given her. She kept a diary so she would not forget.

August 9. Contrary to my prior disastrous attempts, I have now made the perfect quiche. I always follow your recipe to the letter but there's an element of skill that can't be memorized off a card. I seem to have finally mastered it! At least this one, anyway. It was light, fluffy, and delicious. The tiny pearls of butter whisked into the egg made all the difference.

September 26. Today I found a jewelry box hidden behind a heavy bookend in the library (the one shaped like a hunting hound). Inside is a collection of single earrings (sweet of you), and a little silver ring with a myrtle flower. I looked it up in the floriography book and it's supposed to mean the pleasures of memory. I miss you, too. I'm being patient, just like I promised.

September 29. My filaments have grown very strong. They are a little blue, as they were when they first emerged, like the shading on toile china, or someone struggling for air. I can lift a heavy chair with them. Tonight I will see if they will help mend both of you, or if they still don't know how. I think they're learning.

October 1. I cried today. I miss you both very much. A hunter strayed too far onto our lands, and I took his life. Since you granted me your protection, I have found that every day my hunger for it grows—not merely the meat, but the killing. The death itself. And those who cross into our lands are the worst of all. The presumption! It caught me off guard the first time it happened here. I thought that feeling was behind me. But it was just the same as when that man came into my first family's house, the urge to be rid of the intrusion. That, paired with the hunger to consume them... God, it must have been agony for you, when they took you away. I'm so sorry. Soon you'll be nourished again.

October 2. I rubbed the hunter's thighs with sage and honey, and look forward to a pleasing roast.

In a house too large for a lonesome occupant, a woman read aloud.

'Let us go then, you and I,

When the evening is spread out against the sky

Like a patient etherized upon a table;

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,

The muttering retreats

Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels

And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:

Streets that follow like a tedious argument

Of insidious intent

To lead you to an overwhelming question...'

She paused to glance at her charges, her fathers, entwined where she had posed them. Pale and beautiful in dreaming they lay, white tendrils moving lazily against black, curling and uncurling. Some were busy at repairs, mending what was broken. Others were simply touching, holding on. And underneath: a little glow, the suggestion of hope.

Pale and beautiful they slept, waiting to reemerge.

'Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"' she continued. *'Let us go and make our visit.'*

In a house of rest, Abigail slept.

They were all dead. Will, and Alana, and Jack. Margot, too, and Bedelia. Even Freddie. Even *Chilton*. They had been dead for a long time, caught in a web of fine white filaments and pushed, *flung* back into the world of the living by his determination for their company, by his love for them, to continue and consume what brought about their demise, fueled by their own resurrection. Fire, and flood, and battle. They had crossed his threshold, stepped into the ring upon the ground, and entered into a pact with him. And Hannibal, even in death, made himself a new life. They all feasted upon the wreckage, none of them innocent.

In time, he would awake. In time he would begin to move, and speak, his body whole again, and Will's too. In time, all those sworn to him would return, born again of the heart that hid in the dark.

Their kind lived on in the belly of the house.

Chapter End Notes

the immortal pilzkinder (sometimes called igori) are a fungiform species of Folk that i've built over time—influenced by various sources and my own mother's eerie underhill tales that did nothing but encourage me, a young boy *already* prone to climbing out of windows and wading knee-deep in streams, to venture into the woods at night. i've employed these creatures across three or four different universes before i felt them refined enough to join hannibal's. the figure of the pilzkönig, the mushroom king, is relatively new in the pilzkinder mythology, and hannibal's traits and powers in this fic differ greatly from previous incarnations of his race. over time this species has developed from a single organism headed by a matriarchal source, to an inherited changeling state that must be gifted, similar to vampirism. to become pilzkinder is not to be rendered inhuman—some have asked about the state of hannibal's humanity, and therefore his cannibalism—it's more like being taken away by the Folk, partaking of their table and their music, and slowly but surely devouring their secrets, unable to go home again. i hope to continue to explore this little universe in a few oneshots in the future, or another chaptered fic, detailing the further adventures of our mushroom husbands.

this story began as a bandage for a wound. it became something else in the days following my writing the first chapter, which i had intended (some might say foolishly) to stand alone; i kept thinking about will's gutting, kept waking up wondering, *what if something had been **in** there?*

a hat-tip to every poet who made me cry about my monsterboy headcanons and whose work was summarily perverted for the sake of this story. bastardization is within the purview of the bastard, and you're all dead, so i doubt you're too fussed about it.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!